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AUTHOR Champaigne, John R.
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ABSTRACT

The paper projects the purpose of future learning assistance centers (LACs) at the college level, and discusses trends and goals which will enable the learning center to fulfill its purpose. In 20 years the features of a LAC will include individualized instruction and learning, more control by the learner, changes in traditional grading and instructional systems, and the emergence of an educational brokering role which necessitates new staffing patterns. Educational trends leading toward a comprehensive LAC involve increases in the number of nontraditional learners, the growth of the student consumer awareness movement, the inadequacy of traditional grading practices, an increased need for educational accountability, and the financial demands on institutions encouraging a wider variety of offerings to the entire community. Some suggestions for developing the LAC are to move toward the development of a center which can assist any student with any course, begin to assist faculty members in the improvement of their instruction, promulgate the idea of the quality of a LAC, encourage use of the LAC to seek alternative methods of meeting educational goals, and offer the services of the LAC to the community at large. (KC)

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2001: FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF LEARNING ASSISTANCE CENTERS

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Presented at ACPA

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by

John R. Champaigne

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Recommendations for LAC's of the Future

When dealing with the future, the most powerful concept to keep in mind is that the future is a series of events which have not yet occurred. Conceptually, this is powerful because the future then becomes the only time construct which is controlable. It becomes so, because the past has occurred and can't be changed while the present is constantly changing and therefore difficult to affect. For example, everyone here today made a decision to get up early and come here; now that you are here, you can't change anything which has happened up to this point. The present is happening now--and now--and now and it is very difficult to respond to that ever changing now. On the other hand, each of you can make a decision about your future response to the next 30 minutes, the rest of the day or next week. You could decide to leave right now and to use your time more productively, i.e. to go back to bed, to attend another session, have breakfast, or to do some reading.

Futurist Warren Ziegler contends that the future is the domain of intentional action. Intentional in the sense of what it is you will do and intentional in the sense of purposeful, planned action. Ziegler suggests that "Most people, including experts, approach the future as the domain of knowledge, in which they seek to answer the question 'What will happen?' However, knowing what will happen never tells us what we ought to do about it." To discover those "ought to dos" we must consult our intentions.

There are three different stances that people can take when trying to deal with the future. These stances or attitudes are withdrawal, preventative and adaptive. The withdrawal stance occurs when the future appears to be so frightening and terrifying that persons prefer to withdraw from it, hide from it and pretend that there is no future, i.e. someone who is terminally ill. The prevention stance is an attempt to hold back the future, to try to stop it from occurring, to somehow intervene to prevent the future forecast from becoming

true. This stance is best exemplified in crisis planning--which seems to be the usual stance in government and higher education. The adaptive stance occurs when the future is perceived as uncontrolable, unavoidable, or inevitable. Persons taking this stance attempt to cope with the changes as they occur, so they are constantly re-acting rather than being proactive.

Ziegler suggests that the proper stance toward the future should be one of invention, that is, once you have determined what you want the future to be like, then you can begin to develop plans which will enable you to attain your intended future. So instead of simply trying to discover "what will happen", one begins to focus on some of the things that "ought to be done" to achieve that desirable future. The central question now becomes, "How can I take advantage of, or shape, or create events that will enable me to attain my future? And also what steps should be taken now to attain my vision of the LAC of the year 2001?"

How does one go about the formulation of one's vision of the future? Stephen Hincley and James Yates describe in detail seventeen different methodologies which can be used to look at the future. The techniques they described in their book Futurism in Education range from force analysis and relevance trees to morphological analysis and Bayesian Statistics. The technique I prefer to use and that I will share with you today is called scenario construction. This method begins with the definition of a future goal moment, and, by working backward to the present, describes an optimal path from current reality to the specified target.

For the next few minutes I will describe my scenario for the LAC of the year 2001, I'll briefly mention some of the trends and forces which will assist in the fruition of my scenario, and then I'll indicate several steps or short-term goals which should be achieved to insure that my scenario will occur.

My vision of learning assistance centers in the year 2001 is as follows: I view those centers as a place where anyone can go to learn anything they want to without concern with the problems of time, cost, location, or prior background. Thus, LAC's of the future will act as both educational brokers and providers. As brokers the LAC's would act as intermediaries in connecting people who have requested a specific educational goal with people who can assist in meeting that goal, i.e. public schools, industry, other higher educational institutions, informal learning groups, the military establishment or proprietary groups. As providers, LAC's would assist the student with formulation of educational plans or contracts; help to assess the learner's competency and style; provide the appropriate instructional vehicles; and to assist in the evaluation of the outcomes of instruction. To varying degrees parts of this scenario have been and are happening. However, each of the LAC's of the future will be functioning in both of these roles.

By the year 2000, LAC's will be implementing K. Patricia Cross's notion of providing education for each rather than simply an educational opportunity for all. In order to provide education for each the LAC of the future will be characterized by several features:

1. Learning programs are truly individualized
    a) in terms of the style of instruction, i.e. one-to-one, group, programmed, audio, video, or print
    b) level of desired proficiency, i.e. simple competency vs. professional certification vs. avocation
    c) timeframes for learning, i.e. successful completion of the goals will determine the length of the educational experience, not an arbitrary calendar
    d) the learner's style and stage of development are taken into account.

2. Learners will have complete control over the learning experience from setting the goals, to selection of teaching methodology, to evaluation of the results, to withholding voucher payments until success is achieved.
3. Grades are not significant in the certification process but rather the learner's printout carries a detailed description of the learning episodes, the level of proficiency and the goals set and attained by the learner.
4. LAC's will have the capability to meet any educational request either through their own resources or through referral in the educational network.
5. LAC staff personnel would include instructional specialists, computer programmers, instructional designers, media specialists, and counselors.

All in all, LAC's should be exciting, dynamic places to work.

The scenario I have constructed has several general features: individualized instruction and learning; more control over the learning situation by the learner; changes in traditional grading and instructional systems; and the emergence of an educational brokering role which necessitates new staffing patterns. The trends that we have discussed today have all assisted in the creation of my future vision.

I will briefly discuss the forces which will create each of these features. First, individualization of instruction and learning. K. Patricia Cross suggests that the increasing heterogeneity of our student population will force colleges to move toward a mastery learning approach, where it is more important that we gear evaluations on what the student learns rather than on what was taught.

Declining enrollments, increases in the number of nontraditional learners, increased efforts on attrition reduction and a maturing faculty will all act as catalysts in moving toward true individualization of instruction. The LAC

will be an integral element in this process. For where else can the administration and faculty turn for assistance with the increasing numbers of students needing help? And what other place on campus is available and experienced enough to assist the students who present a wide range of backgrounds and skills? How else, but through individualization, can an institution ensure that more than 50% of these students succeed? At first the center will be used to assist students concurrently with their taking a course; then the center will become another instructional loop, where the student will be out of the regular classroom but will attain the same end result as the other students in the course. Then the center will offer several different routes to the end result. Ultimately the student will have a variety of options to choose from to demonstrate mastery of particular course's content.

Secondly the locus of control over the learning episodes will shift to the student. As getting and keeping students becomes important for a college's financial survival, the student will begin to acquire more imput into the educative process. The two major forces causing the shift in the locus of control from the college to the student will be various financial exigencies and the growth in the power of the student consumer awareness movement. Due to declining or steady state enrollments and rising costs, colleges will have to ask students to share an increasing percentage of the costs, which would require the college to yield some of its decision-making control. Coupled with this factor will be the continuation of the trend established by the Federal government of awarding the bulk of financial aid directly to the student instead of to the institution. The various levels of government will demand more and more evidence and accountability for these funds. And since they are awarded to students individually, the accounting will have to be individual results attained with each student.

In her book, The Many Faces of Educational Consumerism, Joan Stark suggests that student consumer awareness is just beginning and that as time goes on we can expect to see dramatic increases in legislative action initiated by students. Many of you are probably aware of two such recent suits, one at the University of Bridgeport, where a student sued over the quality of a course. She maintained that all of the students received A's in the course but all she was taught was how to run an overhead projector. She lost the suit but the significant point is that she was able to bring the suit in the first place. The second suit was brought to Vanderbilt University, where several students complained that a new doctoral program in Business Administration was poorly conceived and delivered. They won the case and were awarded damages.

Stark maintains that growing consumer awareness and the growing stance by government of ensuring that students do not waste public funds will affect college's in four ways: 1) they will have to provide more accurate and detailed information to students, 2) they will have to allow students more autonomy in decision making, 3) they will have to give students more control over the content and direction of their courses of study and 4) they will have to provide more due process procedures for students to handle grievences. Ten years ago at my institution we did not have an academic due process procedure. Over that ten years we had only four academic complaints; last semester alone we had twelve, one of which the student was represented by her lawyer.

The third general feature of my scenario calls for changes in grading and instructional procedures. Grading procedures will change partly in response to increased individualization and partly due to a need to more accurately reflect what the student has learned. Traditional grading methods can't accurately reflect the differing achievements of 30 students who had 30 different instructional goals and took different routes to attain those goals. Traditional grading practices will be inadequate in assisting employers and transfer institutions in assessing

what it is the student actually knows or can do.

There will be changes in instructional procedures due to increased interest in reducing attrition rates, an increased need for educational accountability, and increased awareness of the ways people learn, and due to an increase in the heterogeneity of the student population. Alexander Astin, in his book, Preventing Students from Dropping Out, offers several instructional strategies.

Astin states "that anything that can be done to enhance student's academic performance will also tend to reduce attrition rates." Specifically, he cites tutoring, programmed instruction, special courses for developing study skills, and self-paced learning. He also suggests that colleges attempt to identify and reduce the causes of student's boredom with their courses, i.e. poor teaching, superfluous requirements, and uninteresting courses. K. Patricia Cross, as previously mentioned, suggests that a combination of mastery learning, coupled with variable credit will allow more students to achieve more.

Martha Maxwell suggests in her book, Improving Student Learning Skills, that more use should be made of the students own learning style in designing educational programs. She suggests using such things as Hill's Cognitive Style Mapping, the Perry Scheme (to both support and challenge students), application of research on field dependence and independence, and use of the information on locus of control and self concept in encouraging student development.

The last general feature of my future scenario is the emerging development of a brokering role and changes in instructional roles for faculty members. The brokering role will emerge as a result of the forces caused by competition for students, demands on the part of returning life-long learning students, and the financial demands on institutions encouraging the provision of a wider variety of experiences for the people in the community at large.

Instructional roles will change due to the forces of declining enrollments, high numbers of tenured faculty members at each institution, the elimination and creation of programs in line with student demands, increasing use of technology

in instruction and the institution's need to have more versatile generalist instructors/learning facilitators than specialists.

You might ask why will institutions turn to the learning center as a response to these forces? They will turn to the LAC because it is the only place on the campus that has the experience in diagnosis and prescription of student academic needs; it is the only place on campus which attempts to deal with a student's individual needs; it is the best place on campus to offer alternative approaches to learning material; it is the best place for both students and faculty members to work in a non-threatening atmosphere; and it is the most likely place administration would think of to reassign faculty rather than retrench and where resources could be consolidated and used more effectively.

Successful LAC's will be those that are able to have a clear vision of their intended futures, and those that have planned ahead to use a particular trend to attain their desired future. Since each institution is at a different point in development on the time line going toward the year 2001, it is impossible to make up a generic prescription that each LAC should follow. However, some steps can be suggested which if taken should enable LAC's to be better prepared for the future.

Suggested Actions to Develop the LAC of the Future

1. Move toward the development of a center which can assist any student with any course.

Frank Christ, an innovator and authority on LAC's, suggests that there is no problem with which the LAC cannot help students, faculty, or staff. This assistance goes beyond just the basic skills to help in all academic subjects and even to assisting a student or faculty member with personal problems, publications, or employment skills development. Alexander Astin indicates in his book Preventing Students from Dropping Out, that it is imperative that institutions provide

special programs for both the weak and the excellent student as well as conveying that the institution really cares about the student and wants the student to succeed.

Some suggested implementation procedures for Step #1:

a) peer tutoring program

b) faculty load reductions for working in the LAC

c) part or all of the faculty members office hours in the center

d) use of programmed, media, and computerized materials

e) volunteer tutors from the college or community

f) establishment of the expectation that students who have received help in the center may be asked to assist others.

2. Begin to assist and advise faculty members in the improvement of their instruction.

a) help faculty members to ascertain their particular teaching style

b) provide workshops for faculty in basic remediation techniques

c) provide faculty members with the opportunity to place some part of their coursework in the LAC, i.e. testing, slide identification practice, video tape, etc.

d) conduct in-class presentations on notetaking study techniques germain to the particular instructor or discipline

e) develop a training program for faculty members who are reassigned to the LAC to fill out their teaching loads.

3. Promulgate the idea of the LAC as being a center for the generation of quality at the institution.

Quality will be the catch word of the '80's. How else can institutions articulate their missions when costs are rising and enrollments dropping? A definition of quality becomes difficult when one realizes that there are over 8 million students and more than 2,500 not-for-profit institutions which, when paired together, produce approximately 20 billion different potential educational experiences in America today.

So it would be foolish to say that quality typifies each of these experiences; but it would be equally foolish to say that quality doesn't exist in parts of

the system.

After all quality in higher education can be likened to sexual activity. Everybody claims they have it, want more of it, but don't want it to be evaluated.

Some procedures to take to move toward the image of quality for the LAC might be:

a) keep careful records of all of the center's clients, assistance received, and successes, i.e. your goal may be to have less than the college's attrition rate for your clients

b) publicize the success of the center's users

c) develop systems for accurate diagnosis, prescription, and evaluation of student needs--then do something with the student

d) provide enrichment or broadening activities that expand upon classroom requirements.

e) encourage good students to use the Center to improve their grades from C to B, B to A

f) set specific goals, set up procedures to meet those goals and then evaluate the results and make the indicated adjustments

g) develop some options for students to contract for their learning goals.

4. Encourage the use of the LAC as a place to seek out for an alternative method of meeting course objectives.

a) suggest to faculty the use of the LAC as a place for students to work off incompletes, catch up on missed work, or to go for assistance with present work.

b) offer workshops on study techniques for different disciplines

c) provide a variety of materials for learning the basic skills or concepts of the freshman level courses

d) provide programmed materials which cover the basic course content

e) become knowledgeable about the various cognitive styles and instructional styles and use that knowledge to develop alternatives for learning.

5. Offer the services of the LAC to the community at large.

a) provide instruction for high school equivalency; preparation for college board tests, or civil service examinations

b) offer programs for teaching basic literacy

c) provide programs for special skills such as speed reading, resume' writing, how to get and keep a job, consumerism courses

d) inform the community of all of the different instructional services provided by the center such as filmstrips, programmed learning modules, video tapes, etc.

e) assist local high schools in improving or developing their centers.

LAC's in the year 2001 can be whatever we desire them to be only if we begin now to develop college-wide acceptance and support of the mission of our centers. This support can only be developed by LAC's being prepared to meet the diverse needs of a diverse student population.

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